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ABSTRACT

Prepared as a tribute to the late Professor Ronald R. Edmonds, this paper reviews the history and progress of school improvement based upon the effective schools research. Topics related to the scope and precision of effective schools research are discussed. A need for further research is claimed in the following areas: (1) noncognitive and higher order thinking; (2) multiple measures of the same concepts and constructs; (3) longitudinal studies of students who attend effective schools; and (4) determining whether effective schools sacrifice more ambitious goals in favor of minimum mastery for all. Since most effective schools research has been conducted in elementary schools, concern is expressed over adjustments necessary to conduct this research in secondary schools. Among other topics discussed are the limitations and possibilities of research and what can be learned by studying effective schools as research sites. The paper concludes with a plea for educational researchers to press for additional support for effective schools research and to continue to work collaboratively with educational practitioners at all levels. (MLF)

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School Effectiveness Research: A Tribute to Ron Edmonds

"One Perspective on an Effective Schools Research Agenda"

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ABSTRACT

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SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS RESEARCH: A TRIBUTE TO RON EDMONDS

"ONE PERSPECTIVE ON AN EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS RESEARCH AGENDA"

PREPARED AT MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY, DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

ERIC SUBMISSION Clearinghouse on Educational Management

This paper was presented to the 1984 American Educational Research Association annual meeting in New Orleans. Prepared as a tribute to the personal and professional life of the late Professor Ronald R. Edmonds, this paper reviews the history and progress of school improvement based upon the Effective Schools Research. Ronald Edmonds played a significant role in shaping that body of knowledge.

After reviewing the characteristics associated with Effective Schools , the author in eight recommendations presents proposals which deserve the serious attention and focus of researchers and practitioners. "Effective schools research has not yet had an opportunity to address many important questions."

Approximately one year ago to the day (April 11, 1983) Ron Edmonds and I were traveling together on our way to Montreal for the 1983 AERA meetings. I remember that trip more vividly than most because "things were poppin'!". In December, 1982, the entire issue of Education Leadership had been devoted to Effective Schools and School Improvement. The April issue of the Educational Researcher carried several articles on the general topic of effective schools and effective teaching. The American Association of School Administrators had just declared Effective Schools as being "America's Best Bet." The telephone at the office rang incessantly. Indeed, things were truly "poppin'!".

The pace did not slacken at all during AERA; if anything the recent and increasing numbers of reports critical of American schools added still more context to the effective school's concept.

When Ron Edmonds and I returned from AERA in Montreal, we were filled with ideas and energy. We had an agenda for action that was broad in scope, accommodating to all but the most skeptical, and perhaps most important, was aimed at furthering the cause of the poor and minorities in our schools.

Little did we know that in two short months the agenda for action was to receive a halting jolt, one that would be felt by all of us for many months, even years, to come. The sudden illness and subsequent death of

my friend, research colleague, and fellow school-improvement advocate, Ron Edmonds, was a great personal loss for me and for the field of education, as well. I know I will not be the same without his guidance, wisdom, continuing optimism and his courageous leadership in the American experiment with mass public education.

If this paper captures some of the energy we felt upon our return from Montreal, if this paper communicates some of the important ideas that Ron shared with me, if the paper prompts even one more effective school study which responds to one more important question, I will be pleased to offer it as a small tribute to the memory of Ron Edmonds, a dear friend and a close colleague.

I once had an undergraduate history professor at Western Michigan University who repeatedly said that two characteristics are needed to be great in American History: One must live at the right time, and sadly, one must also die at the right time.

I know that without question Ron Edmonds lived at the right time. His research and scholarly writings were truly ideas whose time had come. Researchers and practitioners alike were moved to action by the possibility that all schools could become as effective as some schools. Whether Ron died at the proper time or not, will be answered by those of us who are still here and privileged to move forward along the course he charted for us. If those who ascribe to the effective school concept will continue to conduct those much needed studies, then Ron Edmond's legacy will be more useful research. If those interested in improving educational

pratice incorporate his ideas, and in turn inspire others, then his legacy will mean improved schooling for students who have heretofore tended to profit least from their schooling. Should these ends come to pass, sad as the present moment seems, we will have to believe that Ron Edmonds lived among us at just the right moment in time.

Effective Schools Research Agenda

In the next few pages I will present and discuss several major questions, issues, and concerns which need to be addressed by effective schools researchers. These issues can be called the second generation problems; they have been raised by those who have read or been involved with the first effective schools studies published during the 1970's. If the effective schools research is to provide a lasting and substantial contribution to both research and practice these questions must be addressed.

The order in which the topics are presented is not intended to indicate a priority for one issue over another.

1. What are the limitations and possibilities of research that is based on rich descriptions of effective practices?

Researchers can stand before professional educators and state emphatically that we know certain things about effective schools, effective teaching, and effective classroom management in 1984 which we did not know

in 1970. Because now we have the "effective practice" research paradigm which for fifteen years has served as the "workbase" of the industry.

The effectiveness paradigm begins with the researcher's careful definition of an effective practice setting, the finding of such a setting, and then a careful study of that and similar settings. Ultimately a rich description of effective practice results. Clearly, schools and classrooms across the United States are improving because they have received the benefits of using this effectiveness paradigm. Researchers and educators can accomplish even more by its continued use, as both a style of inquiry and a form of dissemination. How much better schooling would be if each of our American schools were to become as effective as our currently most effective school!

But what are the limits to the effectiveness paradigm? Can we really discover new knowledge; develop new theories? Are we able to make cause-and-effect statements, if we limit our methodology to <u>descriptions</u> of effective practice.

While these questions are being raised in the context of the effective school, the concerns are equally important to researchers who study classrooms and teachers. While the paradigm ought not to be abandoned, those working with it must conscientiously keep in perspective its limitations as well as its uses.

2. Effective schools are judged to be effective because they demonstrate higher levels of measured achievement for all the students. What other qualities or characteristics do effective schools possess?

Most of the effective schools studies to date have used measured student achievement in the essential skill areas as the primary basis for judging a school as effective. While most would agree that such measures represent an important outcome of schooling, many argue that it is but one of several measures that should be considered. When pressed, those who raise this concern indicate that two additional kinds of measures ought to be used; that is, those who look at non-cognitive outcomes of schooling (such as self-concept, independent learning, etc.), and at higher order cognitive skills (such as concept learning, problem solving, etc.).

In principle the effective schools' studies have never been limited to measures of basic or essential school skills; in practice, however, few measures other than these are available within present school practice.

The researcher is limited by what is available to study at any given school site. How can a researcher remain credible to the varying constituencies served, when one is obliged to measure only what is, instead of what ought to be.

The concerns are a genuine challenge; the need for further research is well-established. What is called for is a series of effective school studies that use the primary measures of effectiveness (mastery of essential school skills) as well as special measures of both non-cognitive

and higher order cognitive learning. Such a study would permit us to determine whether effectiveness is limited to essential skills or is generalizable to other domains of the schooling experience.

Special measures of non-cognitive aspects of school life in the effective school would permit us to answer those critics who say that our concept of the effective school promotes a type of school that is better characterized as a "sweat shop" where neither students nor teachers are happy.

3. Effective schools research emphasizes minimum mastery of essential school skills. Such emphasis is said to promote lower standards for all. Do effective schools sacrifice more ambitious goals in favor of minimum mastery for all?

One of the defining characteristics of the effective school, reported by several researchers, is the high proportion of its students that have evidenced mastery of the intended curriculum. The effective schools are said to be those where the proportion of students achieving such mastery is unusually high (for example obtaining more than 90% on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program's tests). Effective schools will also exhibit a high level of mastery across all the major subsets of the pupil population including the socioeconomically disadvantaged.

Even critics accepts the proposition that some schools can and do meet these standards of student achievement. But they criticize an

instructional program which must emphasize minimum mastery for all, if that effort in any way impedes more able students.

Research needs to determine whether this implied "trade-off" in educational outcomes does in fact occur.

What evidence could be gathered to indicate that such a "trade-off" takes place? And, suppose such evidence is forthcoming--that in the effective schools such "trade-offs" do occur. Then other research should be undertaken to determine whether it has to be so. Here rational variability in the rates of progress for the most able students in various effective schools might provide some insights into those educational/instructional practices which either minimize or maximize these "trade-offs."

4. <u>While effective schools researchers tend to associate similar characteristics with the effective school, do all researchers use the term in similar ways?</u>

The literature is filled with listings of the characteristics of the effective schools. Casual review of the various listings suggests that there is a high degree of agreement across the various studies. However, the critics are concerned that the concepts (such as strong instructional leadership) are either vaguely or are differently defined from one study to the next.

Research of effective schools should be undertaken using multiple measures of the same concepts and constructs. Such repeated measures across a large enough sample of effective schools would permit the type of analysis which permits these measurement questions and terminologies to be addressed.

The scale of such research would need to be relatively large. Perhaps the best way to think about the study would be to have the study conducted by a consortium of research centers. Such a team approach would permit the researchers to sample many different measuring devices at numerous geographic sites throughout the United States. In part, this would allow for samples of school to be drawn from rural, suburban, as well as urban schools. This itself, would allow the generalizability of the effective schools research.

5. <u>In the past most effective schools research has been conducted in elementary schools. What adjustments and accommodations are needed to study the effective secondary school?</u>

In the typical elementary school, effective or not, it is true that most students experience all or nearly all aspects of the curriculum and instructional program. The elementary school tends not to be highly differentiated when it comes to the opportunity to learn.

When we examine the secondary schools, the pattern seems to be very different; the curriculum and instructional program tends to be highly

differentiated. This means that not all students have the same opportunity to experience all aspects of the curriculum. On the face of it, a school program should receive neither praise nor sanction if the students have not been provided the opportunities to learn what is expected of them. Perhaps an example might be helpful to illustrate the complexity of the problem which emerges from these high levels of curricular differentiation.

In the typical high school the proportion of students who are permitted to take ninth grade algebra varies significantly from school to school. Which of the following outcomes would be preferred? First, a school where a high proportion of the students take ninth grade algebra and a relatively high proportion do not pass it; second, a lower proportion enroll in the algebra course, but nearly all who attempt it are successful in completing it. These competing alternative outcomes are present in secondary schools. This kind of institutionaly-sponsored differentiation is a barrier to effective school research at the secondary level.

6. Do the characteristics of effective schools as reported in the literature need to be altered to accommodate the more complex secondary school organization?

In the context of the typical elementary school the administrative structure tends to consist of a principal and a school secretary. When

a critic says that the school lacks instructional leadership it is a simple matter to determine who the leader is.

A secondary school is a more complex organization. There may be a principal, one or two assistant principals, and numerous quasi-administrative staffing roles. Leadership then becomes a "team" concept.

Research that examines the roles and functions of all those who play leadership roles in the secondary schools will help us discover if the strong instructional leadership might be more commonly found in the department chair's role. The rationale to support this possibility may go as follows: Perhaps it is unrealistic to expect a building principal to maintain himself or herself at a state-of-the-art level when it comes to instruction across a comprehensive curriculum. Is it not more realistic to believe a chairperson represents the state-of-the-art in that subject discipline? The department head is viewed as the most credible source to the department personnel, as well. More research on various administrative structures and the consequence of those structures on teaching and learning is needed. The research studies should be conducted in the context of both more and less effective schools. Insights about truly effective practices would emerge and prove valuable to those now struggling with secondary school improvement.

7. What happens in the longer term to those students who have attended the effective elementary school?

One of the important areas for needed research has to do with a variety of longitudinal studies of students who attend the effective school. While most of the effective school studies have required schools to meet a standard of effectiveness for more than a single year, few if any of these studies have followed a cohort of students from that school to the next.

Research studies that move with the students as they go on to the junior high or high school would permit us to answer questions regarding the long-run advantage, if any, of having attended an effective elementary school.

Some have suggested that the value added to attending the effective school does not transcend the school itself. When the youngsters find themselves in a new school, with new students and teachers, and learning new content, the relative advantages of the earlier experiences are dramatically diminished. Research can address these concerns.

8. The schools and school districts which are presently using the effective schools research as a basis for school improvement programs constitute valuable research sites. What can be learned about effective schools, effective planned change, and effective school improvement by studying these research sites?

The press for school improvement will not subside significantly for a year or two. Virtually every school or school district will be expected

to act in the name of school improvement. As in the past, a significant proportion of those actions will be taken by schools interested in basing their improvement on the effective schools model.

To the extent that researchers and evaluators are able to capitalize on these school improvement initiatives and begin to link outcomes with change processes, the effective schools research will get one step closer to cause and effect research.

If enough different case studies are conducted and each points in similar directions, regarding successful implementation strategies, then the knowledge base associated with the effective schools and school improvement will expand greatly. If the effective schools researchers and the practitioners are able to share thei "lessons learned", there can be a cumulative build-up of useful knowledge.

Summary

The eight areas addressed in this paper are important research foci and deserving of serious study. Clearly, these research and policy questions are not the only questions that should be asked. However, they do represent a start on an agenda that will take many years to complete.

My major concern is that the effective schools research movement will come to a halt. This would be most unfortunate because we are only now beginning to get some insights into effective practices at the school level.

In their eagerness to act, practitioners may say "We do not need more research; we already know what makes a school effective." This is only partially true. We know more now than we did five years ago, but we have yet a long way to go.

The very apparent reduction in resources available for research makes the prospects of undertaking our ambitious research agenda less promising. We must press for additional support for effective schools research. We must actively communicate with others in the research enterprise. We must continue to work collaboratively with educational practitioners at all levels. On the one hand we need to help them to see the possibilities for improvement which will evolve from a prudent use of the effective schools research. On the other hand, we must remind them of the limitations that are imposed because the effective schools research has not yet had an opportunity to address many important questions.